

The hole was a little narrower than arm's length. The rest of us flew, floated, or rode into the descent, but Varrin led the way by pressing his hands and feet into the tunnel walls and sliding. The edges were shaped organically, with irregular lumps and folds, but made of hard metal. Varrin's gauntlets and sabatons sparked against it as he skated down at near-freefall speed.

The tunnel opened into the ceiling of a dark, two-hundred-foot-tall chamber, and Etja slowed Varrin with her gravity control to prevent him from an uncomfortable landing. We made our way to the ground and inspected the new space.

It was an obelisk chamber, and at first glance, it was a boring one.

The obelisk itself was impressive, its tip rising more than halfway to the two-hundred-foot ceiling above. While one-hundred-and-fifty feet of meticulously engraved obsidian-black stone, glowing with untold mystic power, and hidden within the depths of the Earth for time immemorial would have been considered quite interesting for most people, we'd grown a bit jaded to that sort of thing.

"Big obelisk," said Xim.

"Seen bigger," I said, turning my gaze over the rest of the barren chamber. Aside from the obelisk, there was nothing else. No strange machines, no boss monster, no gruesome aftermath of ancient violence. The chamber was as wide as it was tall, with a circular edge and an arched ceiling, making it a dome or half-sphere. "There's a pattern to Delve architecture. Feel like they should mix it up now and again."

"It probably has to do with the mana accumulation," said Xim, taking a few steps closer to the obelisk. "This shape may be more efficient."

"My Pocket Delve's obelisk is in a rectangular chamber," I said, walking up and placing a hand on Xim's shoulder, stopping her. "Grotto hasn't complained. The ceiling *is* vaulted, though. Also, this is the most obvious ruse the mimic's made so far." I nodded at the obelisk.

"Oh," said Xim, shoulders slumping. "Of course."

"Should we start burning it down, or wait for it to attack?" I asked.

"You're both much too relaxed about this," said Varrin, pulling his greatsword back out of his inventory.

I mused over how we'd all originally lugged heavy gear bags around, rather than relying solely on the inventory. On death, inventory items were returned to a designated home point and thus lost to the rest of the party for the duration of the Delve. My own home point was my permanent underground residence back in Formation, although I worried that my death might result in a rather large loot-based explosion in the district since I had a *lot* of stuff in there.

Gear bags carried outside of the inventory space ensured that our essential items would be available to those who survived. While it was a nice thought, our party had a pretty mobile fighting style, and the bags did more harm than good. The reality of my Pocket Closet also made the gear bags feel... quaint.

The listed inventory size on my interface was no longer a plain number without any mention of what the number referred to. It had been cubic yards, it turns out, which was a strange measurement to see once I'd figured out how to toggle the advanced UI filters on and off. Now, it was listed in cubic *miles*. Yeah, the Closet was Big, with a capital B. We had a hundred different gear bags stuffed full of different styles of provisions inside the Closet, and I could pull one out to toss it onto the ground when needed.

The chamber was pretty dark, so I did that very thing and pulled out a bag full of glowstones. There were handheld glowstone lamps, headlamps, mounts that we could hang the lamps onto, and even a pair of modified crossbows that would launch a glowstone-laden arrow with enough force to penetrate rock if we wanted some overhead lighting. That last one was Nuralie's invention. I tossed a few loose stones around the chamber, giving Varrin and Etja a bit more light to see by. Nuralie, Xim, and I all did well enough in the dark without them.

"Calm?" I said, looking at Varrin as I hurled another glowing rock. I could almost hit the ceiling. "Don't let my placid demeanor mislead you. That shit was disturbing."

"Many Delves are a sort of test," he said. "Grotto has admitted as much, but this one *feels* like a test. The other Delves we've done have all had an objective that obscured any intentional challenge being engineered for us."

"This one states it outright," I replied, hefting one of the crossbows. We probably didn't need it, but these things were fun as hell. "Go, go, gadget glowstone!" I said, firing the bolt into the ceiling high above. The glowstone was nowhere bright enough for it to provide any useful lighting from that distance.

No one commented on the wastefulness. We had a dozen of the launchers in my Closet, and glowstones were cheap. Cheap to *us*. For an average person, they were a luxury that could never be justified against the cost. And before anything is said about

how I could use that money for a greater good, I already had an orphanage named after me: Esquire Arlo's School for Gifted Youngsters. It was nice, too. No slum-lord Arlo in these here parts. Delvers were an overall net benefit to the world economy, anyway. Mana chips were useful and in high demand.

Not that we'd gotten any from this Delve so far, but the choir room's worth of historical artifacts I'd plundered should make for some fine additions to the Supplicants of Astrania's public collection, assuming that none of the relics were mimics...

And let no more be said about my generosity.

"What was the king screaming about, anyway?" I asked. "No more suckling swine clawing at the Delve's'... places... 'How many eons since we saw such haste towards the end?' It used the word 'generations' as well. 'How many generations?' Both Grotto and Cage have used that word when talking about Delvers."

"Is that what it was saying?" asked Xim. "Also, I don't wanna call it 'the king'. Come up with a better name."

"Perhaps slime-face has simply gone mad," said Varrin. I gave him a dubious look.

"Emperor Ooze didn't seem-"

"No," said Nuralie.

"Mommy Mimic-"

"Uh-uh," said Xim.

"Queen Yuck-"

"Please don't ruin the word queen!" said Etja.

"What's this fucking Delve called?" I asked.

"*The Naysayer's Tomb*," answered Varrin.

"Tomb Mimic didn't strike me as crazy."

Nuralie looked at me in disbelief, while Xim tapped thoughtfully at her chin.

"It's functional," said the Cleric. "Not your best name."

"Why am I in charge of the names?"

“You’re the party leader,” she replied with a smirk.

“If you like,” Varrin began, “I could-”

“Varrin, brother, your names are... they need some work.”

The big guy hung his head a bit. I turned to Nuralie.

“It felt like it was spurring us on,” I said. “Like a misguided cheerleader.”

“That’s what you got from that?” asked Nuralie.

“What did *you* think? No one else speaks Loson’binora but us. You understand the native syntax better than I ever will.”

Nuralie froze in a ‘deep thought’ pause.

“Tomb Mimic’s rhythm sounded,” pause, “broken, in the beginning. As it spoke, it became one of elation... elation and relief.”

“Was it pausing at the end?” I asked. “Sounded like it was rambling non-stop.”

“Staccato,” said the loson. “Subtle, advanced. Can be mistaken for a breath or other beat.” Pause. “We can cover them in the next lesson.”

“I thought we’d gone over them all.”

“You are fluent without them. It is also something that non-Eschens,” pause, “can rarely grasp. I am sure you will pick it up in a day.”

“Why did it speak loson in the first place?” asked Varrin.

“The other languages,” said Xim, “the ones it tried to speak first, sounded archaic. I didn’t hear enough to figure out what any of them were, but the phonetics were similar to some ancient cultures I’ve studied.”

“Modern Hiwardian is relatively new,” said Varrin. “An adaptation of ancient Hiwardian and code language adopted during the Littan occupation. The original language from before the Littans enslaved my ancestors is lost.”

“Not many people in the First Layer speaking Othertongue,” said Xim.

“Whereas I,” I said, “am the only man alive who speaks English.”

“Loson’binora is old,” said Nuralie. “Very old. It does not change much.”

“Then it’s the natural language Tomb Mimic would land on,” I said. “If it’s an ancient First Layer creature with no experience in the modern world, Loson’binora is the only language it could use to speak to us.”

“It also had scales,” said Xim. “It was emulating a loson. A geulon, specifically.”

“The scales only showed after it started speaking loson’binora. It may have been replicating a geulon because it was mimicking the Eschen language, and saw Nuralie.”

“I wish it hadn’t,” said Nuralie.

“Or maybe...” a voice echoed throughout the chamber around us, “it is because I was once a loson.”

We looked for the source of the voice, but it came from everywhere. In the distance, however, I noticed a wide mouth growing on the wall. There was another further down the wall, and then another. They dotted the entire perimeter.

“Mimics are mana monsters,” I announced to the room in Loson’binora. “Are you saying that you’re not a mimic?”

The fact that it could understand, if not speak, Hiwardian ruled out some of our theories. Then again, there were other ways it could know what we were saying, without speaking the language. I didn’t like the idea that Tomb Mimic was psychic, but it *would* help to explain some of its abilities.

“So certain a folly to harbor,” said the voice. It had pitched down from the feminine squeal it spoke with above, now sounding like a giantess. “Did the System tell you that?”

“It... did,” I admitted. “You disagree with the classification?”

“Tell me what the System says,” pause, “about *this* form.”

I’d expected that the obelisk itself was the mimic, but the floor around us morphed and slid out from under our feet, exposing the true ground six inches below. The mass formed up in front of the obelisk, and an enormous throne rose from the goo. Atop it sat a young loson woman wearing a crown adorned by jagged spires that rose two feet from her scalp. She had deep blue skin and scales, and a reptilian tail wrapped around from behind her and laid over her lap.

From what I saw so far, mimics didn’t have souls. But this mimic did. It was gray and metallic, slightly darker than a silver Delver’s, and it was latticed by the densest network

of violet striations I'd ever encountered. The striations, I had discovered, indicated the changes that special Delves made to a Delver's soul, a fact that became apparent once our party had received our rewards from *The Cage*. All five of us, plus Grotto, now had the same tell-tale sign of a special Delve completion woven into our spiritual essence.

I moved on from examining the woman and checked my interface.

The Mimic: Architect, Level 10.

"Architect?" I said.

"She has a level," said Xim, "not a grade."

"Only Delvers have levels," said Varrin.

"Architects have levels, too," I said. "And souls, by the way. What the fuck is an Architect?"

"They design bridges!" said Etja. "And other things."

"The golem speaks more wisdom than she knows," said The Mimic, in Hiwardian.

"It's my highest stat!" said Etja.

"Is that so?" The Mimic asked, grinning as though a toddler had just told her an interesting fact, then turned steely eyes on me and swapped back to Loson'binora.

"Your party is prone to divergences. I believed your tangents to be a distraction, yet your focus did not waver," pause, "much."

"Guess I've been rubbing off on everyone," I said. "Organizational culture trickles down from leadership, you know?"

"I do," said The Mimic, her face growing stern.

"You seem a lot more put together now. No drooling or screaming or opaque references to mysterious hidden knowledge."

"Those were my subprocesses," said The Mimic, waving a hand. "I took time to ingest their memories as I awoke."

“That seems like a useful ability. I’ve figured out how to remotely view the different parts of my Pocket Delve, but to have that sort of total presence across the whole place is pretty powerful.”

The Mimic raised an eyeridge at my words, and I got a scowl from Varrin. He probably didn’t approve of me divulging that intel, but we were here to acquire information. And levels. And chips and loot and equipment. But, *more than* ten percent of our motivation was getting information about the *Get Out of Cage Free* card. A little quid pro quo often greased the wheels of dialogue.

“You’ve no idea,” said The Mimic. “It is a curse as much as a blessing. I’ve learned three new languages since waking, and each is as crude as the last. Your civilization is underdeveloped, your culture base, your arts unrefined.” She placed her fingertips on her forehead, kneading the skin as though she had a headache. “I’ll need to adjust the sensitivity of my hibernation protocols.”

“What’s she saying?” asked Xim.

“I think she’s saying that her presence extends a *lot* farther than just this Delve,” I replied in a whisper. I raised my voice to address The Mimic again. “Are you responsible for all of the other mimics?”

“I *am* all of the other mimics. I swear, the System has grown bold to use such a facile term for me. That which is everything need not pretend to be anything.”

“There’s a lot to unpack there. Are you from an ancient civilization?”

“Ancient is a word that fails to encompass the breadth of time that has transpired since I last woke, much less since my people left this world.”

My breath caught and my heart rate sped up.

“Are you one of the Old Ones?” I asked, trying to keep the excitement from my voice. “The creators of the Delves?” Nuralie snapped her head toward me, then back at The Mimic. Her whole body tensed.

The Mimic’s expression soured.

“No,” she said with a sneer. “They came before me. Even farther removed in time from myself than I am from you.” She leaned forward on her throne, her eyes wide and intense. “*Much* farther removed.”

“I-”

The Mimic held up a hand.

“I’ve no more interest in your curiosities,” she said. “Your party is promising, especially given that you are only in the first phase. All of you exhibit abnormal mana signatures, too powerful for your stage of advancement. That is not all, either. Hmm.” She eyed me and Xim. “Two revelators.” She then turned to Nuralie. “Perhaps a third, but the power has been sealed. I am disappointed that a loson has failed in her faith. There is yet time to redeem yourself, child. Your weapon’s borrowed power is a crutch.”

Nuralie's arms went slowly limp, and she dropped her bow. Her expression was an ocean’s depth of shock and desolation.

The Mimic turned to Etja.

“Divine spawn,” she said in a clinical tone. Pause. “With Delver levels. This is novel, perhaps worth my awakening. That it has happened worries me, however. The avatars grow more troublesome.” She finally turned to Varrin, looking down at him with disdain, and swapped back to speaking in Hiwardian. “*You* are nothing special.”

The words echoed through the chamber and lingered in the silence that followed. Varrin gave The Mimic a beastly *what the fuck did you just say to me?* look, and I feared that the encounter would turn very violent very fast, but The Mimic followed her statement with a single word that reset the tone.

“Yet.” She leaned back in her throne, hand stroking her tail like a favorite pet. She’d have made a great Bond villain. She continued, still speaking Hiwardian. “I am disappointed. I know why you are here; I have heard all of your conversations while inside of this place. I will not help you. It is too soon for this generation.”

The excitement that had been building within me sank.

“We were originally going to ask the Delve Core for information,” I said.

She glared at me.

“I know. I have heard *all* of your conversations. This Delve’s Core has no personality graft. It will not speak with you, even if you were to tear it from the obelisk and dismantle its chassis. It exists solely for the automated functions it provides me.”

“Then that’s it?” I said. “You lay down all these ridiculously intriguing statements, then clam up?”

“Such is my privilege,” said The Mimic.

“What about the challenge?” asked Varrin. “The Delve objective?”

The Mimic rolled a hand in the air.

“You may have your paltry level and may leave this Delve. I have already challenged you more than is appropriate.”

“Geez, what a letdown,” I said. “I was starting to think you might be cool, then you go all Grotto on us.”

“Your lives continue,” she said. “Be thankful that I allow that much, child. What little knowledge you already possess is dangerous, especially in the hands of such an underdeveloped society. The only reason I let you live is that you are too impotent to use it.”

The Mimic’s insults and entitlement caused my emotions to boil over, and all of the aggravation that I’d bottled up throughout the Delve started to peek through. I pointed a finger at The Mimic.

“The past two days inside this shit stain of a Delve have been the most frustrating and infuriating of both of my entire lives,” I said. “You and all the other ancient Delve asshats in your little secret club are irritating the fuck out of me, stringing us along with tantalizing details, only to blush and cover your mouths when you let something substantive slip. I’m sick of it!”

“Yeah, tell her! Boo!” shouted Xim. It startled me, and I turned to the Cleric, who gave me a thumbs-up. She took a step forward and pointed at The Mimic as well. “Give us answers or we’ll kick your ass!”

I took Xim by the arm and pulled her back, pushing her hand down to stop her from pointing.

“What the hell, Xim?”

“What? She’s only level ten. We’ve been carving our way through mimics this whole Delve. We can get answers out of her the hard way.”

“First, not sure I want to advocate for torture or physical abuse when confronted with a non-violent obstacle. Second, she’s got ten times more violet in her soul than anyone I’ve ever seen.”

“Oh?” said Xim. “What’s your point?”

“Her level doesn’t mean shit is what I mean.”

“Neither does ours,” she retorted, crossing her arms.

“Christ, just don’t volunteer the whole party for a fight by yourself. She’s giving us the opportunity to leave.”

“Then what were you going on about?” she asked, holding her hands out in confusion.

“I needed to express my dissatisfaction with the Delve experience she’s cultivated here.”

“We’re leaving?” asked Etja. She looked up at me with big, sad eyes. I swear she did it because she knew it would get me to capitulate to whatever it was she wanted. “It was just getting good!”

“You want to stay?” I said. “And fight *that* thing?” Etja nodded, clutching her upper pair of hands together at her chest. I rolled my eyes. “What about you, Varrin?” His grip was as tight on the hilt of his sword as I’d ever seen, but his expression was stone cold.

“She insulted me,” he said. “As an adult, I find it best to confront these sorts of interpersonal conflicts head-on. Shouldn’t let them fester.”

“Stabbing somebody is not an appropriate interpersonal conflict resolution skill.”

“Really?” said Varrin. “I find that it works quite well.”

“I didn’t say it wasn’t effective.”

“I need to know more,” said Nuralie. She’d recovered her bow and, although she looked a bit shellshocked, had regained most of her composure. “Also, I can test my new products on her.”

“Why does this conversation make me feel like we’re not the most upstanding of people?”

“It’s a monster, Arlo,” said Xim. “Monsters don’t have feelings.”

“That line of thinking is problematic. And I’m pretty sure this one does have feelings.”

“Nope,” she said. And that was the end of that argument.

“Mimics are violent and deadly,” said Nuralie. “If we defeat her, maybe we defeat *all* of the mimics.” Pause. “We’d be saving lives.”

“Now you’re reaching.”

There was a loud thud, and I turned to see The Mimic standing at the foot of her massive throne. She was unhappy.

“The insolence,” she spat. “The stubbornness. The greed. The overconfidence.” Her eyes drifted slightly apart. Her mouth opened into a wide smile. Slime ran down her chin and dripped onto the ground as the floor rose to fold around her. Her throne collapsed and joined the mass enveloping her body. As her demented face was subsumed by the enormous mound of churning mimic goo, her voice raised an octave and she let out a gurgling shout.

“Maybe I won’t be disappointed, after all!”

Then, the blob of slime rose, growing a new mouth for The Mimic to speak, its lips fat and dripping with ichor.

“COME NOW, CHILDREN. TRY AND MAKE ME TALK.”